
Congo, D.R: Inga dams mean big business for corporations and no benefit for local communities

The Inga hydroelectric scheme (Inga 1, Inga 2, Inga 3 and Grand Inga) is located 140 miles southwest of capital city Kinshasa. It lies on the largest waterfall by volume in the world, the Inga falls, where the Congo River drops 96 m (315 ft) over the course of nine miles with an average flow of 42,476 m³/s.

The project started in 1920 during Belgian colonial rule. Colonial authorities forced the site's first inhabitants to leave without any compensation. Inga's displaced communities haven't received any compensation till today.

The hydroelectric plants Inga 1 and Inga 2 were commissioned in 1972 and 1982. Both dams contributed heavily to the country's spiraling debt crisis and currently operate at only 40% capacity because they never received maintenance: about half of the 14 turbines don't work at all. (1)

Inga 3 would be a tunnel diversion hydropower scheme for electricity export to South Africa and other neighboring countries, and to attract energy-intensive industries to DRC, with a total cost up to \$8 billion. (2)

Grand Inga (see WRM Bulletin no. 77) was proposed in the 1980s and was delayed by political conflict in central Africa. It started moving again in April last year when seven African governments and the world's largest banks and construction firms met to plan the massive hydropower project with an estimated cost of US\$80 billion. Designed as a series of 52 750MW turbine installations, the Grand Inga mega-project (which includes the related Inga 3), could produce over twice the power generation of the world's largest and most notorious Three Gorges Dam in China.

Grand Inga will allegedly "light up Africa" thus allowing industrialization as a way of alleviating the continent's poverty. Quoting International Rivers' report: "Inga's centralized grid system is likely to do little to 'light up' Africa for the 90% of people now living without electricity, most of whom live in rural areas outside the reach of power grids. Grid expansion is quite costly, and trying to reach scattered rural communities would significantly increase project costs as well as the cost of electricity. ... Based on historical trends, the trickle-down effects in the form of jobs and taxes will likely be minimal for Africa's poorest, while also increasing unsustainable national debt loads." (3)

Indeed, the mega-project will provide industrial economic growth for foreign businesses seeking cheap electricity and financial opportunities for Africa's elite business and government leaders. They have the financial support of the World Bank Group, the European Investment Bank and the African Development Bank as well as the political leverage of the G8 countries.

Also, according to a The Guardian's article, "Grand Inga's prospects of being completed by 2022 are said to have risen significantly in the last year as countries, banks and private companies have found they can earn high returns from the emerging global carbon offset market and UN climate change credits." (4)

In a time of credit crunch, the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), a market-based program to subsidize alleged low-carbon projects in developing countries allowing industrial polluters to continue “business as usual”, represents another highly needed source of money for such a millionaire scheme. Grand Inga project is being sold as “clean and environmentally friendly” energy that can offset carbon emissions elsewhere “by harnessing run-of-river hydroelectricity as opposed to damming up a river”.

But as International Rivers warns: “While run-of-river projects can have less damaging consequences than storage dams, they are often far from environmentally benign. The term ‘run-of-river’ is undefined, and is often therefore used to ‘greenwash’ projects. In fact, many run-of-river dams have large dam walls, major social and environmental impacts, and even reservoirs. The extent of barriers and diversion canals involved in this colossal project is still unclear, but the cumulative impacts of Grand Inga’s 52 turbine installations, as well as Inga 3, on the river’s flow could be considerable. Impacts to fisheries, riverine forests and river ecology will need careful study. As more studies of GHG emissions from hydropower are conducted, scientists are finding increasing evidence that emissions from dams, especially methane, are a legitimate concern”.

(1) Inga 1 and Inga 2 dams, International Rivers, <http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/2877>

(2) Inga 3, International

Rivers, <http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/africa/grand-inga-dam-dr-congo/inga-3>;

(3) Grand Inga, International

Rivers, <http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/africa/grand-inga-grand-illusions>

(4) “Banks Meet Over £40bn Plan to Harness Power of Congo River and Double Africa's Electricity”, John Vidal, The Guardian, <http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/2744>